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# Strategic predisposition in communication management

## Understanding organizational propensity towards bridging strategy

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to identify factors influencing an organization's predisposition to bridging strategy, and tests relationships between those factors and bridging strategy.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Online survey was conducted in South Korea. Hierarchical regression was used.

**Findings** – Identified factors are environmental complexity, top management attitude toward stakeholders, analysis orientation, and authoritarian culture.

**Research limitations/implications** – By adopting the concept and measures of bridging as an organization's public-engagement strategy, this study was able to capture an organization's strategic approach for problem-solving in communication management.

**Practical implications** – Strong analysis orientation allows organizations to look into problems in their complex environments affecting their performance and their key stakeholders before deciding on strategies; resultantly, they are more likely to reduce problems and to improve their performance. In contrast, authoritarian culture discourages an organization's adoption of bridging strategy.

**Originality/value** – This study is the first empirical study investigating the dynamics of factors influencing organizations' strategic predisposition in communication management.

**Keywords** Communication management, Environmental complexity, Analysis orientation, Authoritarian culture, Bridging strategy, Strategic predisposition

**Paper type** Research paper

Organizations have their own strategic predispositions. This means they prefer particular approaches when choosing strategies to achieve their goals and missions. For example, IBM prefers a marketing perspective, while Hewlett-Packard favors an engineering-excellence perspective. These perspectives are reflected in their strategic decisions (McGee *et al.*, 2010). Several scholars see strategy as a pattern in organizations' strategic decisions and actions (e.g. Mintzberg, 1987; 1994; Steyn, 2007) or as a pattern of objectives and policies for achieving goals (e.g. Jain, 1997). Strategy is also defined as a set of consistent behaviors (Mintzberg, 1994). It can be argued that organizations' strategic decisions and choices tend in certain directions with different levels of flexibility and control.

Academic and industry communities have acknowledged that strategic decision making considers the interplay of an organization's internal and external factors. Organizations should discover, evaluate, and exploit the sources of opportunities from

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their environment (Tan and Tan, 2005) and the way organizations interpret and use those environmental factors are affecting their strategic decisions (Ashmos *et al.*, 2000; Sharma, 2000). In public relations and communication management literature, scholars have attempted to identify factors influencing an organization's position toward its publics on the continuum of one end being pure accommodation, the other being pure advocacy (e.g. Cancel *et al.*, 1997, 1999; Jin and Cameron, 2006, 2007; Pang *et al.*, 2007, 2009) or factors predicting a two-way symmetrical communication approach (Grunig *et al.*, 2002; Toth, 2007).

However, our previous understanding of communication strategies has been limited to the direction (one- or two-way) and effect of communication (symmetrical or asymmetrical) and to certain types of strategies such as message strategies (e.g. Werder, 2005) and image-repair strategies (e.g. Benoit, 1995, 2000, 2004; Coombs, 1995, 2004, 2006, 2011; Holladay, 2009). Now we should look beyond these. Moreover, as organizations co-exist with their environment, influencing, and being influenced by it (Tan and Tan, 2005), it is necessary to understand the interactions and dynamics among environmental factors and a communication strategy as part of organizations' strategic adaptations and management.

This study is interested in identifying internal and external environmental factors affecting an organization's predisposition to a strategic management approach in communication management and public relations practice. Organizations strive to attain organizational effectiveness and competitive advantage, and are therefore expected to adopt a strategic management approach toward that end. However, several factors affect their strategic decisions or strategic directions, and not every organization enjoys competitive advantage. Accordingly, it is important to explore and identify the factors and their interplays which affect communication strategies an organization prefers in pursuing its goals and mission.

In understanding an organization's predisposition to a communication strategy, this study adopts the strategic management theory of public relations – i.e., emphasizing the ethical and responsible management of an organization's behaviors and decisions affecting key publics, plus those publics' behaviors for building and maintaining favorable organization-public relationships. Grunig and his colleagues (Grunig, 2006, 2009; Kim and Ni, 2010; Grunig and Kim, 2011; Kim *et al.*, 2013; Kim and Kim, 2015) have supported the concept of strategic management of public relations, and call it the behavioral, strategic management paradigm of public relations, or bridging function (to avoid confusion, the term “bridging strategy” will be used throughout this paper). Based on management literature (van den Bosch and van Riel, 1998), Grunig (2009) conceptualized bridging as a public relations activity to emphasize an organization's efforts at problem-solving for favorable organization-public relationships and organizational effectiveness. Kim and Kim (2015) reinterpreted it as a public relations strategy for problem-solving between management and publics, and suggested that it dictates how the organization should be governed in terms of reflecting and engaging voices and interests of key stakeholders and publics in management's decision making and strategy formulation.

Still lacking, though, is an explanation of how organizations formulate or conceive communication management strategies for strategic management and organization-public relationship, and of how organizations develop their predispositions and preference for bridging strategy. To contribute to pertinent knowledge, this lack should be addressed and obviated. Relatively little scholarship has been devoted to determining variables that may impact communication management and public

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relations strategy conception or an organization's predisposition. Werder and Holtzhausen (2009) also called for future research that identifies organizational variables contributing to the use and effectiveness of communication management and public relations strategies.

Accordingly, this study will discuss a conceptual base of bridging strategy, identify external and internal factors influencing an organization's predisposition to bridging strategy, and test relationships between those factors and bridging strategy. Regarding an external factor, environmental complexity is considered. Regarding internal factors, analysis orientation, top management's attitude toward collaboration with stakeholders, and authoritarian culture are examined in this study. Finally, both theoretical and empirical implications of this study will be discussed. The following section will discuss the conceptual base of bridging strategy as a communication management and public relations strategy under the behavioral, strategic management paradigm.

### **Conceptual base of bridging strategy: a behavioral, strategic management approach**

Relatively limited knowledge exists regarding strategic management of corporate communication (van Riel, 1995) and communication management and public relations strategy (Steyn, 2003). Steyn (2007) suggests that public relations strategy "provides the focus and direction for an organization's communication with its stakeholders and other interest groups in society" (p. 142). Yet less clarity exists than should in using the term strategy in communication management and public relations (Steyn, 2003, 2007) and this requires more scholarly attention. For instance, some scholars define communication management and public relations strategy as message strategy (Werder and Holtzhausen, 2009), while some others differ, for example, labeling it relationship cultivation strategy (Ki and Hon, 2007). Often, the term public relations strategy is misused among public relations practitioners (Tibble, 1997) and seems preoccupied with symbolism (Grunig, 1993) and image management (Nekmat *et al.*, 2014). This problem continues in literature, and research on communication management and public relations strategy is limited.

Moreover, still unclear is whether an organization has a propensity toward a particular focus and direction in its communication management practice. In addition, little research has been done toward explaining how organizations develop their strategic propensity for particular strategic choices in communication management and public relations. In this context, an organization's tendency for a particular strategy is similar to the term strategic orientation (Morgan and Strong, 2003; Galbreath, 2010) or organizational predisposition (Ashmos *et al.*, 1998). This strategic orientation affects an organization's choice and execution of strategy for business performance (Morgan and Strong, 2003). For example, Galbreath (2010) found that different organizations have different strategic orientations, such as proactiveness or defensiveness, and that these differences also affect the level of corporate social responsibility activities. As for issue management practices in public relations, for example, organizations prefer either an inter-directed or an outer-directed approach (Lauzen and Dozier, 1994).

In investigating factors affecting an organization's strategic predisposition to a communication strategy, this study's focus is bridging strategy (Grunig, 2009; Kim *et al.*, 2013; Kim, 2014; Kim and Kim, 2015). Concurrent with a strategic management approach to public relations, or with the behavioral, strategic management paradigm of public relations, Grunig (2006, 2009) introduced new terminology: bridging.

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The bridging approach involves adapting organizational activities so they conform to external stakeholders' expectations (van den Bosch and van Riel, 1998; Mezner and Nigh, 1995). It is in line with an organization's adaptive strategy in management by which the organization "changes with environment" rather than "deals with environment" (Chaffee, 1985, p. 4), because the bridging strategy perspective requires the organization to change simultaneously and continuously according to its environment monitoring and to make its actions responsive to environmental pressures (Chaffee, 1985; Kauffman, 1995; Ashmos *et al.*, 2000).

A similar idea of this bridging approach can be found also in environment responsiveness strategy from management literature. An organization using this strategy seeks "trust-based collaborative relationships with a wide variety of stakeholders" and the integration of perspectives of a variety of stakeholders into decision making, such as for product design and development (Sharma and Vredenburg, 1998, p. 735). It helps managers' grasp of key issues affecting the organization and its stakeholders by engaging those affected stakeholders in decision making.

If this bridging approach is applied to communication management and public relations, the goals of bridging are to resolve problems between an organization and its key stakeholders, and to pursue consensus between an organization and those stakeholders via proactive and dialogic communication (Grunig, 2009; Grunig and Kim, 2011; Kim, 2014; Kim and Kim, 2015; Kim *et al.*, 2007, 2013; Kim and Ni, 2010). Organizations under the bridging approach are willing to improve business performance or mold policies relevant to key stakeholders. Intended beneficiaries of this strategy are both the organization and its publics (Laskin, 2012).

This study adopts Kim and Kim's (2015) reinterpretation of bridging as a public relations strategy for strategic management approach to corporate communication, which suggests that bridging strategy is significant to a strategic corporate governance model in engaging key stakeholders in the organization's decision-making process: in stances on problems between an organization and its publics, it bridges and/or narrows divergences. Bridging is a relationship-centric, action-focussed strategy for problem solving and public engagement (Kim and Ni, 2010; Grunig and Kim, 2011). By integrating perspectives of key stakeholders and publics into communication management strategies, an organization can be more responsive to the issues and needs of its concerned stakeholders and publics, and proactively can build collaborative relationships with them.

In communication management, if an organization has a propensity toward this action based and collaborative bridging strategy, it strives for responsible decisions for its stakeholders and publics. Reducing the gap between a firm's expected and actual behaviors, its communication management effort enhances its reputation. In other words, this is possible only when the firm's actual performance matches its communication messages (Philippe and Durand, 2011). Shen and Kim (2012) also suggested that achieving authenticity is crucial for positive organization-public relationship by matching communication and action. Note that bridging strategy does not discount the role of messaging but it does re-focus the organization's priorities from being message-centric to behavior-centric, and from being organization-centric to relationship-centric (Kim and Kim, 2015). An organization under bridging strategy is likely to gain and enjoy high performance reputation (Kim *et al.*, 2007) and to enhance the quality of organization-public relationships (Grunig, 2009).

This study's main purpose is to gain better understanding of organizations' propensity toward a strategic management approach in corporate communication, in

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other words, bridging strategy. Organizations understand and use strategies based on different assumptions about their environments (Foster and Jonker, 2005). Not every organization makes the same strategic decisions even if they are under the same conditions and environments. Hence, reasons will exist why some organizations prefer this bridging strategy while others do not. Accordingly, the following research question is raised:

*RQ1.* What factors influence an organization's propensity toward bridging strategy in communication management and public relations?

To provide the answer, this study explores whether differences exist in organizations' inclinations toward a strategic management approach to communication management and public relations or bridging strategy, depending on internal and external factors. In addition, explaining an organization's tendency toward bridging strategy requires development and examination of scales to measure it. The following section will discuss potential factors impacting an organization's propensity toward bridging strategy.

### **Identification of factors for bridging strategy**

Environmental factors affect an organization's strategic decision making (Pearce and Robinson, 1997; Olsen *et al.*, 1994). Understanding the internal and external environment in which an organization operates is critical to explaining an organization's predisposition to a strategic management approach. Many management- and communication management scholars refer to the importance of interaction with internal and external environments determining an organization's strategic decisions (Cutlip *et al.*, 2006; Grunig *et al.*, 2002).

Management scholars refer to factors such as size (Laforet, 2007; Harrington and Kendall, 2006) and organizational structure (Russell and Russell, 1992), managerial perception of environmental uncertainty and complexity (e.g. Rueda-Manzanares *et al.*, 2008) and organizational culture (e.g. Kemp and Dwyer, 2001) to identify relationships among organizational strategy, organizational factors, and performance. Those relationships are products of the dynamics among organizational factors. For example, Mintzberg (1977) proposes that the process of strategy formulation is the interplay of an environment, an organizational operation system or bureaucracy, and a leadership, that mediates between the environment and the organizational operation system.

Yet relatively little scholarship has been devoted to determining variables that may impact public relations strategy conception or selection by an organization. A study by Meznar and Nigh (1995) identified three organizational determinants on organizational preferences for buffering or bridging: size, resource importance, and top management's attitude regarding collaboration with stakeholders. The bridging strategy they conceptualized, however, was based on public affairs and boundary-spanning activities to deal with an external environment. Although the role of public relations is considered also a boundary-spanning function, their work does not fully incorporate the characteristics of public relations and corporate-communication management strategies addressing relationships with stakeholders and the public. Further, their concept of public affairs does not distinguish between advertising and public relations, and is limited to government relations, community relations, press releases, and promotional efforts.

Accordingly, this study will test the validity of Meznar and Nigh's (1995) findings, in light of Kim and Kim's (2015) bridging as public relations strategy, and Grunig and his colleagues' concept of the behavioral, strategic management paradigm of public

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relations (e.g. Grunig, 1992; Grunig *et al.*, 2002; Grunig and Kim, 2011; Kim and Ni, 2010). Then, based on the literature in management, corporate communication management, and public relations, this study will identify potential factors influencing bridging strategy, and will test hypotheses on the relationships between those factors and bridging strategy. Factors are categorized as external and internal, according to Mintzberg's (1977) notion of strategy formulation as the interplay of its environment and internal factors.

## **An external factor influencing bridging strategy**

### *Environment complexity*

The relationship between an organization and its complex environment influences the choice of public relations worldviews and public relations functions (Grunig, 1992; Gilpin and Murphy, 2010, 2012; Murphy and Gilpin, 2013; Spicer, 1997). In other words, public relations strategies are products of interdependent relationships between the influences of stakeholders and an organization's decision-making process. To contemplate the process of strategy formulation, strategists (i.e. policy makers or managers) are those who concern themselves with identifying the most appropriate fit between external environments and internal capabilities (Harvey, 1982). Therefore, how strategists perceive and interpret their environments is crucial in strategic management (Ashmos *et al.*, 1998). From a communication management perspective, a communication manager assumes the role of strategist to interpret the nature of the environment, and to inform top management of problems or issues in the environment that affect the relationship between the organization and the public, and organizational effectiveness.

Turbulence in an external environment impacts strategy planning (e.g. Rueda-Manzanares *et al.*, 2008). This implies that the strategy-planning process depends on how managers perceive their environments. Previous studies have examined the relationship among an aspect of the environment such as complexity, uncertainty, and heterogeneity and strategy formulation (e.g. Keats and Hitt, 1988; Fredrickson and Mitchell, 1984; Miller *et al.*, 1988, as cited in Slevin and Covin, 1997). Certainly these aspects are challenges and threats for the strategic decision-making process, as they bring changes at an unpredictable rate and direction in the environment. Generally known is that organizations perceiving a high degree of environmental uncertainty will choose strategies different from those of organizations perceiving a low degree of environmental uncertainty. Recently, Gilpin and Murphy (2010) have argued that complex circumstances in the environment require our rethinking of traditional assumptions about approaches such as prediction and planning.

Management scholars suggest that organizations respond in different ways to perceived environmental complexity. Some organizations prefer simple, managerial strategies, while others choose strategies consistent with the characteristics of complex environments (Ashmos *et al.*, 2000). The former approach is called complexity-reduction response and the latter is called complexity-absorption response (Boisot and Child, 1999). While organizations pursuing complexity reduction and simplicity minimize their goals, activities, and interactions for decision-making, and place high value on control and predictability, organizations seeking complexity absorption choose to reflect the complexity of the environment in them (Ashmos *et al.*, 2000). Organizations which acknowledge the possibility of conflicts created by pursuing multiple goals (Boisot and Child, 1999) have more adaptability (McDaniel and Walls, 1997) and capability of co-evolving with their environments (Ashmos *et al.*, 2000).



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In public relations and communication management literature, scholars have acknowledged the significance of environmental complexity for communication management strategy. Gilpin and Murphy (2012, 2013) suggest that current communication management should take a complexity-based approach that tolerates ambiguity, takes a holistic view, and uses adaptive learning to deal with uncertainty and unpredictability. Earlier, Grunig (1992) suggested that if an organization sees its environment as threatening or constraining, it is more likely to use two-way symmetrical communication and to adapt its behavior to the changing environment. Similarly, Lauzen and Dozier (1994) support the positive relationship between perceived environmental complexity and a proactive, open-systems approach for strategic decision making. In management literature this idea of adapting behavior to the complex and dynamic environment is aligned with the perspective of complexity-absorption strategy. Such managerial approach to environmental complexity means inclusion of “multiple and sometimes conflicting goals,” “decentralized decision-making patterns,” and “a wide variety of interactions and connections for decision making” (Ashmos *et al.*, 2000, p. 581). Organizations in this perspective collect information about their environments as well as about their behaviors, and use that information for adapting to their environments (Kauffman, 1995).

Based on the above discussion, it can be predicted that high complexity in the environment will increase the organization’s preference for bridging strategy. As an environment becomes more dynamic and uncertain, organizations will seek a strategy to adapt to the turbulence and complexity of their environments so as to be more effective and to meet their stakeholders’ needs (Grunig, 1992; Lauzen and Dozier, 1994). Logical extension of this is that organizations are more likely to absorb their environmental complexity into their decision making and communication strategy formulation when they see high environmental complexity. And organizations more inclined to the bridging strategy will seek to narrow the differences between the management and the public for problem-solving and favorable organization-public relationship building and maintenance (Grunig and Kim, 2011; Grunig, 2009). It follows, then, that perceived environment complexity may cause an organization to increase its bridging efforts to identify and address the issues of the publics. Thus, the hypothesis is posited as follows:

- H1.* If an organization perceives its environment to be complex, it is likely to adopt bridging strategy in its corporate communication.

### **Internal factors influencing bridging strategy**

#### *Top management attitude toward stakeholders*

Strategy formulation involves the dominant coalition (McGee *et al.*, 2010). Top management is responsible for the strategic direction and performance of their organization (Harvey, 1982). Top management’s values and managerial style are crucial to strategy formulation, and influence the strategic decision-making process (Hambrick and Fredrickson, 2001). Not only does a manager’s philosophical perspective influence the strategic decision-making process, but also his/her interpretations and influences on strategy relate to the strategy-formulation process (Parnell and Lester, 2003).

Harvey (1982) argued that “the managerial style of the CEO influences the organization’s climate and interrelationships in all the interdependent activities that must be integrated into the organization’s strategy” (p. 36). In addition, how top management and the company view stakeholders is reflected in organizational

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communication, which “helps stakeholders enact their relationships with the company” (Heath, 1994, p. 161). It thus is important to identify top management’s attitude toward interaction with its environments. Sharma (2000) also proposes the relationship between managerial interpretations of issues and opportunities and an organization’s environmental strategy.

In Meznar and Nigh’s (1995) study, top management’s positive attitude toward cooperation with external stakeholders was associated positively with bridging activities. That is, firms whose top managers emphasize collaboration with external stakeholder groups, and who seek to assume leadership positions on social issues, are significantly more prone to engage in bridging activities. This study’s author wishes to test the validity of Meznar and Nigh’s (1995) hypothesis in the context of corporate communication management with the reconceptualized bridging strategy and its new measures. Therefore the following hypothesis was posited:

- H2.* If top management’s attitude is positive toward collaborating with external stakeholders, the organization is more likely to adopt bridging strategy in corporate communication management.

#### *Analysis orientation*

An analysis is an antecedent to the formulation of an organization’s objectives and strategies (Dess and Origer, 1987). Organizations implement this function for strategy formulation by conducting environmental scanning (Jennings and Lumpkin, 1992); this is a crucial function of public relations. Analysis is considered the overall problem-solving approach to strategic decision making, which is secured by understanding issues in both the internal and the external environment (Miller and Friesen, 1983; Morgan and Strong, 1998, 2003). The analysis is an organizational trait which reflects “knowledge building capacity and enabling processes for organizational learning” (Morgan and Strong, 2003, p. 166). Analysis is critical to achieve the fit between an organization’s strategy and its environment (Morgan and Strong, 1998, 2003).

Therefore, if an organization is strongly analysis oriented, it is more likely to adapt to the environment to achieve the strategic fit between itself and its environment by carefully analyzing issues in that environment. In the context of corporate communication, an organization with a strong analysis orientation is more likely to prefer a bridging strategy to address issues of its key public in its communication efforts for a favorable organization-public relationship. Therefore, the following hypothesis is posited:

- H3.* An organization’s analysis orientation is positively associated with bridging strategy in corporate communication.

#### *Authoritarian culture*

Organizational culture refers to “a set of beliefs, widely shared, about how people should behave at work and a set of values about what tasks and goals are important” (Sadler, 1998, p. 118). Shared values mean what is important among members, while norms indicate appropriate attitudes and behaviors in an organization (Chatman and Cha, 2003). Organizational culture impacts an organization’s strategy formulation and implementation, decision-making patterns, and performance (Chan *et al.*, 2004; Yarbrough and Morgan, 2011). Specifically, organizational culture strongly influences “how the organization practices public relations” (Grunig, 1992, p. 298), hence public

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relations is a product of culture (Sriramesh *et al.*, 1996). Additionally, organizational effectiveness can be enhanced by a culture that achieves organizational goals and simultaneously meets members' needs (Harvey, 1982). If a firm's culture is consistent with its strategies, the culture itself is the firm's strength, while a culture preventing an organization from adapting to changing environments can lead to that organization's stagnation and failure (Harvey, 1982). Thus it is important to distinguish the type of organizational culture that helps adapt to the needs of environments to increase the organization's effectiveness.

Based on the previous literature (Ernest, 1985; Gordon, 1990; Schein, 1985; Wallach, 1983), Sriramesh *et al.* (1992, 1996) have conceptualized organizational culture as a continuum in which authoritarian culture is at one end of the spectrum and participatory culture at the other, meaning that highly authoritarian culture can be interpreted as low-participatory culture and vice versa. Sriramesh *et al.* (1996) attribute the following to authoritarian culture: a closed system with top down decision making based often on authority, tradition, and trial and error; little concern for the lives of employees outside the organization; placing value on tradition and conservative values; and employees tending to separate their personal goals from the organization's goals. This authoritarian culture is similar to hierarchical culture (Deshpandé *et al.*, 1993), which emphasizes predictability, order, rules and regulations in a bureaucratic organization where the leader's role is mainly an administrator.

In contrast, participatory culture uses an open-system approach to management. An open-system approach assumes that organizations exist in a complex environment, and that firms continuously need to adapt to forces in the external environment (Harvey, 1982). As for the relationship with its environment, participatory culture is more likely to value knowledge about the organization, while authoritarian culture is more likely to value knowledge of the organization (Grunig, 1992). Previous literature (Gordon and DiTomaso, 1992; Denison, 1990) reported a positive relationship between performance and organizational culture under which an organization is able to adapt to changes in environment. If culture does not allow an organization to reflect environmental changes in its decision making, it is difficult for an organization to address the constantly changing needs of stakeholders and publics and as a result it does not yield performance.

It may follow, then, that an organization with authoritarian culture is less likely to prefer the bridging strategy as – under authoritarian culture – an organization is less flexible to changes in its decision making, while bridging strategy requires an organization to adapt itself to the dynamics of its environment and to revise its problematic behaviors or policies flexibly if necessary so that its behaviors or policies are responsible toward the key publics and stakeholders affected by them. Hence, the following hypothesis can be posited:

- H4.* An organization's authoritarian culture will negatively influence its propensity to bridging strategy.

## Methods

A web survey using the Qualtrics program was created and distributed to in-house corporate communication managers in South Korea from March to September 2013. To secure a list of contacts, three possible sources were initially identified: the Korean Federation of Industries (KFI), the Korean CEOs' Association of Multinational Corporations (KCMC), and the Korean Research-based Pharmaceutical Industry

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Association (KRPIA). KFI contact information was publicly available, while the other two organizations were reachable through their respective representatives. This author contacted all KFI members via e-mail. KCMC declined to participate in the survey, but KRPIA agreed to participate. The link to the web survey was sent to a total of 499 KFI organizations and to 30 organization members of KRPIA. A total of 105 organizations participated in the survey (a 19.8 percent response rate).

### *Participants*

Of the 105 organizations 44 belong to production-goods manufacturing (41.9 percent). In total, 23 organizations are in consumer-goods manufacturing (21.9 percent), nine in finance (8.6 percent), 17 in services (16.2 percent), three in construction (2.9 percent), and nine in other industries (8.6 percent). As for organization size, 17 organizations reported having less than 300 employees (16.2 percent), 21 organizations claimed to have between 300 and 999 employees (20 percent), 19 organizations had between 1,000 and 1,999 employees (18.1 percent), 17 organizations reported between 2,000 and 3,999 employees (16.2 percent), and 31 organizations reported having over 4,000 employees (29.5 percent).

### *Measures*

*Environmental factors.* For internal factors, analysis orientation, top management's attitude toward stakeholders, and authoritarian culture were selected. As an external factor, environment complexity was chosen. To measure top management's attitude toward stakeholders, this study used Mezner and Nigh's (1995) items. For the authoritarian culture, five items were created based on the Excellence Study (Grunig *et al.*, 2002) (see the Appendix for measures). Venkatraman's (1989) measures of strategic orientation of business enterprise scales were used for analysis orientation. As for the external factor, environment complexity measures were adopted from Mezner and Nigh's (1995) study (see the Appendix for measures).

*Bridging strategy.* Scales for measuring an organization's propensity to use bridging strategy were created based mainly on Grunig's (2006, 2009) conceptualizations and Kim and Kim's (2015) reinterpretation of the strategic management paradigm in public relations and Grunig *et al.*'s (2002) study. Other literature pertaining to bridging strategy was also referred (e.g. Grunig and Kim, 2011; Kim *et al.*, 2007, 2013; Kim and Ni, 2010) (see the Appendix for measures).

## **Results**

Bicorrelation analysis was implemented to see the possibility of multicollinearity (Table I) and there was no multicollinearity issue among predictor variables. After the correlation test, a reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's  $\alpha$  (Table II) and composite variables were made to analyze. Scales for top management's attitude toward stakeholders were recoded to differentiate low- and high levels of attitudes among participant organizations (highest 2 meaning high adaptation to environment, average 1, lowest 0). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for each variable was satisfactory (above 0.80).

After reliability check, hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to test the posited hypotheses (Table III). Strategy formulation is affected by both external and internal environmental factors. The macro-environment refers to all forces in a broad society that affect the micro-environment (Kotler and Armstrong, 2006). While macro-environment is general for all business enterprises, micro-environment is specific to a

**Table I.**  
Bicorrelations

	TA	EC1	EC2	EC3	EC4	EC5	AC1	AC2	AC3	AC4	AC5
TA	1										
EC1	-0.045	1									
EC2	-0.034	0.656**	1								
EC3	-0.080	0.853**	0.688**	1							
EC4	-0.243*	0.432**	0.460**	0.430**	1						
EC5	-0.286**	0.298**	0.455**	0.309**	0.507**	1					
AC1	0.272**	0.190	0.193*	0.283**	0.056	0.108	1				
AC2	0.246*	0.255**	0.373**	0.296**	0.073	0.114	0.647**	1			
AC3	0.233*	0.180	0.190	0.277**	-0.038	0.038	0.747**	0.675**	1		
AC4	0.219*	0.210*	0.334**	0.283**	0.009	0.155	0.730**	0.698**	0.734**	1	
AC5	0.249*	0.220*	0.307**	0.292**	-0.026	0.103	0.535**	0.485**	0.588**	0.557**	1
AO1	-0.099	0.056	0.074	0.065	0.138	0.214*	-0.281**	-0.433**	-0.322**	-0.322**	-0.245*
AO2	-0.122	-0.091	-0.062	-0.103	0.310**	0.025	-0.204*	-0.386**	-0.396**	-0.397**	-0.358**
AO3	-0.154	0.063	0.008	0.014	0.329**	0.010	-0.382**	-0.369**	-0.473**	-0.496**	-0.357**
AO4	-0.248*	-0.051	-0.102	-0.152	0.207*	0.033	-0.353**	-0.443**	-0.495**	-0.484**	-0.429**
AO5	-0.149	0.053	-0.029	-0.052	0.179	0.069	-0.202*	-0.308**	-0.396**	-0.374**	-0.302**
BG1	-0.265**	0.002	0.092	-0.022	0.156	0.237*	-0.448**	-0.429**	-0.447**	-0.319**	-0.327**
BG2	-0.205*	0.124	0.198*	0.173	-0.004	0.164	-0.321**	-0.280**	-0.324**	-0.200*	-0.124
BG3	-0.168	0.039	0.157	-0.012	0.289**	0.221*	-0.475**	-0.437**	-0.506**	-0.405**	-0.274**
BG4	-0.245*	0.098	0.128	0.048	0.263**	0.195*	-0.462**	-0.405**	-0.556**	-0.395**	-0.306**
BG5	-0.263**	0.107	0.101	0.106	0.237*	0.172	-0.402**	-0.444**	-0.416**	-0.425**	-0.297**
BG6	-0.160	0.112	0.198*	0.076	0.190	0.290**	-0.420**	-0.273**	-0.418**	-0.312**	-0.294**

(continued)

	AO1	AO2	AO3	AO4	AO5	BG1	BG2	BG3	BG4	BG5	BG6
TA											
EC1											
EC2											
EC3											
EC4											
EC5											
AC1											
AC2											
AC3											
AC4											
AC5											
AO1	1										
AO2	0.418**	1									
AO3	0.327**	0.677**	1								
AO4	0.553**	0.637**	0.575**	1							
AO5	0.453**	0.624**	0.561**	0.735**	1						
BG1	0.505**	0.418**	0.464**	0.467**	0.446**	1					
BG2	0.454**	0.248*	0.315**	0.387**	0.391**	0.720**	1				
BG3	0.562**	0.463**	0.478**	0.486**	0.440**	0.753**	0.611**	1			
BG4	0.444**	0.444**	0.559**	0.415**	0.414**	0.751**	0.576**	0.763**	1		
BG5	0.441**	0.374**	0.479**	0.416**	0.309**	0.674**	0.543**	0.592**	0.701**	1	
BG6	0.368**	0.391**	0.426**	0.324**	0.326**	0.644**	0.511**	0.584**	0.672**	0.746**	1
<b>Notes:</b> TA, top management attitude toward stakeholders; EC, environment complexity; AC, authoritarian culture; AO, analysis orientation; BG, bridging strategy. *, **, ***Correlation is significant at the 0.05 and 0.01 levels, respectively (two-tailed)											

Table I.

firm. In addition, macro-environment is distant and indirectly influences an organization, while the micro-environment is immediate and directly influences the performance of business. In this study external factors are considered first followed by internal factors to see the effects of independent variables from general to specific. In addition, top management's point of view affects managers' strategic approaches to deal with issues and pressures from environment and this practice creates the norms inside the organization (i.e. this is the way we do things in this organization). Based on these arguments, the entry order of each independent variable was decided. In addition, as a majority of participants in the survey represent the production goods industry and the size of organizations varied, it is necessary to control two variables; size and industry.

Size and industry were entered first as control variables at Step 1, and then environmental complexity was entered at Step 2. *H1* was supported. Environmental complexity was significant for predicting bridging strategy ( $\beta = 0.248$ ,  $SE = 0.095$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ) (*H1*), meaning that when managers perceive the environment as complex they are more likely to prefer bridging strategy than managers who perceive their environment as simple. Top management attitude toward stakeholders was entered at Step 3 and *H2* also was supported ( $\beta = 0.226$ ,  $SE = 0.147$ ,  $p = 0.020$ ) (*H2*). Top management attitude toward stakeholders accounted for 4.9 percent as incremental variance, and this increment led to 12.2 percent of total variance for predicting bridging strategy. This result implies that when top management is open to collaboration with stakeholders, it is more likely to be inclined toward bridging

**Table II.**  
Reliability Analysis

Variable	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Bridging	0.920
Environmental complexity	0.826
Analysis orientation	0.854
Authoritarian culture	0.899

**Table III.**  
Hierarchical  
multiple regression  
analysis predicting  
bridging strategy

Predictor	$\beta$	Bridging strategy SE	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1			0.014
Industry	-0.123	0.071	
Size	-0.020	0.079	
Step 2			0.059**
Environmental complexity	0.248**	0.095	
Step 3			0.049**
Top management attitude toward stakeholders	0.226**	0.147	
Step 4			0.343***
Analysis orientation	0.612***	0.078	
Step 5			0.060**
Authoritarian culture	-0.356**	0.088	
Total $R^2$		0.525	
$n$		105	

**Notes:** \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

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strategy. The next step, Step 4, was analysis orientation. *H3* was supported strongly ( $\beta = 0.612$ ,  $SE = 0.078$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) (*H3*). This finding indicates that an organization with strong analysis orientation is more likely to have predisposition toward bridging strategy.  $R^2$  change was 0.343 ( $p < 0.001$ ) and this variable accounted for 46.5 percent of total variance. Finally at Step 5 authoritarian culture was entered and was significant for predicting bridging strategy ( $\beta = -0.356$ ,  $SE = 0.088$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). A negative relationship was indicated between authoritarian culture and bridging strategy. This means that authoritarian culture discourages the adoption of bridging strategy in communication management practice (*H4*).  $R^2$  was 0.060 ( $p < 0.001$ ) and total variance was 52.5 percent to the model (Table III). Considering the total variance, this model is effective as a whole in predicting an organization's predisposition to bridging strategy. It implies that predicting an organization's inclination toward a certain strategy requires consideration of both external and internal environmental factors as tested in the study.

### **Discussion and limitations**

This empirical study is the first to investigate the dynamics of corporate communication strategy formulation and strategic predisposition to bridging strategy in corporate communication management. Kim and Kim (2015) called for statistical generalization in testing relationships between potential environmental factors and bridging strategy. Identification of factors contributing to organizational preference of bridging strategy, and statistical examination of the new scales of bridging strategy, can advance theoretical development in communication management and public relations literature. Identified internal factors for bridging strategy were top management's attitude toward stakeholders and analysis orientation. Perceived environmental complexity was a significant external factor. Findings indicate that environmental factors suggested in management literature also affect the formulation of communication management strategies, and that they contribute to forming consistent tendency toward a certain direction.

Among these identified factors, analysis orientation was the strongest for contributing to bridging strategy. Steyn (2007) points out that corporate communication strategy forms part of enterprise strategy dealing with issues in an organization's environment. This study's finding indicates that an organization with a strong analysis orientation tends to pay more attention to the issues of its strategic publics and to seek to bridge gaps between management and its publics for problem solving. Strong analytical capability allows organizations to look into problems affecting their performance and their key stakeholders before deciding on strategies and that, resultantly, they are more likely to reduce problems and to improve performance.

By taking an interdisciplinary approach, applying the theories of management and communication management on this study, it was possible to test the relationship between perceived environment complexity and an organization's predisposition to bridging strategy. Several scholars including Grunig (1992), Lauzen and Dozier (1994), Gilpin and Murphy (2010) have emphasized the significance of environmental complexity for strategy formulation and prediction. The finding of this study let us rethink how managers should deal with environment complexity for strategic management and stakeholder relationship and remind us of the fact that communication strategies and environment are interdependent and indispensable relationships. As Ashmos *et al.* (2000) point out, an organization which can absorb environment complexity into its strategies has a capability to co-exist with its



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environment. Future communication research should explore further complexity theory for sustainable communication management practices.

Additionally, this study extended and applied the concept of the organization's generic strategy, bridging strategy, in the context of communication management and public relations. The concept of bridging strategy is not new in public affairs and strategic management. However, in previous research, management scholars' understanding and application of bridging strategy has been limited. In addition, the idea was scattered into various terms and concepts, such as adaptive strategy, stakeholder management theory, and environment responsive strategy. Now this study has brought those scattered ideas from the area of strategic management into the area of communication management. This study also has tested Kim's (2014) scales and Kim and Kim's (2015) reinterpretation of bridging strategy that reflected key ideas of strategic-management theory of public relations.

By refining the idea of bridging strategy in strategic management in the context of communication management and public relations, this study extends understanding of communication management strategies and helps overcome previous preoccupations with image- or message-focussed strategies for issue and crisis management (e.g. Grunig, 1993). Instead, by highlighting an organization's problem-solving efforts and actions for organization-public relationship, the study redirects scholarly attention to the fit between an organization's actions and words in its communication strategy. An overemphasis on image management may produce "disjunction between the firm's actual and expected actions" (Philippe and Durand, 2011, p. 973). By pairing its actions and words, the organization can improve its reputation (Philippe and Durand, 2011).

Finally, this study has moved the IABC Excellence Study forward by extending the idea of communication management strategy, and by directing focus to the purpose of an organization's communication management strategy (i.e. problem solving) and to the value of an organization's genuine action in strategy addressing the issues of publics. Many corporate communication and public relations studies have been preoccupied with testing and criticizing the two-way symmetrical communication approach since the release of the IABC Excellence study. However, the term *two-way symmetrical communication* the study emphasized caused much misunderstanding and criticism among scholars and practitioners, part of the reason being the term's limitations in explaining the nature of organizational *problem-solving* efforts for building and nurturing organization-public relationship (*italics emphasis added*). By adopting the concept and measures of the bridging strategy as an organization's public relations strategy for problem solving and public engagement (Kim and Kim, 2015), this study better captured an organization's strategic approach to corporate communication management and public relations. In the long run, this contributes to the organization-public relationship and organizational effectiveness. If bridging is considered an overarching, grand strategy for relationship-centric, action-focussed strategy, it may incorporate several public relations strategies under one umbrella, including relationship cultivation strategy (Ki and Hon, 2007, 2008, 2009), stewardship strategy (Kelly, 2001), and rectifying-behavior strategies (Benoit, 1995, 2000, 2004; Coombs, 1995, 2004, 2006; Smith, 2013).

This study is not free of limitations. It might be argued that sample size was insufficient. However, considering the accessible number of organizations in South Korea, the response rate (19.8 percent) should not be considered low. In addition, as this study was interested in predicting bridging strategy, it was not possible to explain in

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what strategic direction organizations are heading if they lack internal or external factors identified in this study, or if they exhibited low tendency toward bridging strategy. Still, this study was able to examine differences of organizations between low and high tendency toward bridging strategy in depth, and what factors allow organizations to be closer to strategic management in corporate communication. In future, to test the validity of the proposed model of environmental factors and bridging strategy, cross-cultural study should be conducted. Stronger factors for predicting bridging strategy may be possible, considering the limited amount of incremental variance that identified variables contributed to total variance (52.5 percent).

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Which of the following descriptions best fits your firm's philosophy toward social issues? (Please mark the one best description).

- Authoritarian culture vs participatory culture (Grunig *et al.*, 2002) (low score means participatory, high score means authoritarian culture)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7  
(Strongly disagree)                                  (Strongly agree)



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**Bridging (Kim, 2014, 2015; Grunig, 2006, 2009; Grunig *et al.*, 2002; Kim *et al.*, 2007)**

BG1. Our organization's decision-making process reflects the strategic publics' needs.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
(Strongly disagree)                      (Strongly agree)

BG2. Making and revising our organization's decisions and behaviors is important to address the issues of our strategic publics.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
■ (Strongly disagree)                      (Strongly agree)

BG3. Our organization attempts to adapt our corporate practices to reflect the changing expectations of our key publics.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
(Strongly disagree)                      (Strongly agree)

BG4. Building and nurturing relationships with our strategic publics is the key to our public relations program.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
(Strongly disagree)                      (Strongly agree)

BG5. The purpose of our public relations program is to develop mutual understanding between the management of our organization and publics.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
(Strongly disagree)                      (Strongly agree)

BG6. The purpose of our public relations program is to adapt the attitudes and behavior of management as much as it is to change the attitudes and behaviors of publics.

1    2    3    4    5    6    7  
(Strongly disagree)                      (Strongly agree)

**About the author**

Soojin Kim is currently an Assistant Professor at Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University. She is interested in the strategic management of public relations and public relations strategies. Specifically, her work so far has examined how organizations' behaviors or decisions along with other antecedents affect key publics' behaviors, and the impact of such behaviors on organizations' effectiveness. Her research interests also include how the theory and practice of public relations conceptualizes public relations strategy, and how the implementation of public relations strategy influences organizational effectiveness. She received her PhD in Public Relations and Strategic Management from the Purdue University. Soojin Kim can be contacted at: soojin.pr@gmail.com

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